

### Gender Politics in International Governance: 6-8 October 2010, Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

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## Gender Politics in International Governance

6-8 October 2010, Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

### Summary

The conference underscores the new international momentum for advancing gender equality created by the establishment of "UN Women". Gender mainstreaming is the principal implementing strategy, however, a number of legal, practical and cultural challenges demand further concerted solutions. Academics, practitioners and activists should advocate for a mechanism allowing them to play an active role in the new entity.

#### Keywords

Gender Mainstreaming, Global Governance, Norms, UN Women

### Zusammenfassung

Gender-Politik in internationalen Regierungen. Konferenz vom 6. bis 8. Oktober 2010 in Genf, Schweiz

Die Konferenz betont die wichtigen Impulse für die Gleichstellung der Geschlechter durch die Einrichtung von „UN Women“, insbesondere auf internationaler Ebene. Gender Mainstreaming ist die wichtigste Umsetzungsstrategie, wobei eine Reihe von rechtlichen, praktischen und kulturellen Herausforderungen weitere, abgestimmte Lösungen erfordern. WissenschaftlerInnen, PraktikerInnen und AktivistInnen sollten sich für einen Mechanismus stark machen, der ihnen eine aktive Gestaltungsrolle in der neuen UN-Organisation ermöglicht.

#### Schlüsselwörter

Gender Mainstreaming, Global Governance, Normen, UN-Women

The recent establishment of the United Nations (UN) Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women – to be known as “UN Women” – marked a crossroad for internationalist feminist politics. Its creation offers an opportunity to reflect on existing international gender equality policies and to think about strategies for the new body. With this aim, a colloquium entitled “Gender Politics in International Governance” was hosted at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, co-organized by Gülay Caglar (Humboldt University, Berlin), Elisabeth Prügl (Graduate Institute), and Susanne Zwingel (State University of New York, Potsdam, USA). The three-day conference brought together a select group of academics, practitioners and activists from around the world to assess the state of research and discuss policy options.

The conference opened with a keynote speech by Ms. *Bineta Diop* (Femmes Africa Solidarité) who highlighted the formation of UN Women as a new international momentum for advancing gender equality. Conference participants recognized that feminist advocates within the UN, civil society and academia have made gender equality issues highly visible. For instance, women’s rights are perceived as an integral part of the international human rights framework; gender mainstreaming is an accepted organizational

tool in global governance institutions; gender is taken seriously in international security governance, which is reflected in a number of related UN Security Council resolutions; and gender expertise has become professionalized. Nevertheless, to build on these successes, UN Women will need to address a number of challenges.

Practitioners like *Erika Kvapilova* (UNIFEM/UN Women) and *Madeleine Rees* (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) identified the gap between the normative/legislative achievements and their implementation in the field as one major challenge. *Hilary Charlesworth* (Australian National University) examined the potential of available legal instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and criticized their focus of non-discrimination as implicitly relating to a male norm. Departing from the reality of domestic contexts, both *Prof. Rita Sabat* (Notre Dame University) and *Prof. Peggy Levitt* (Wellesley College) presented the ways in which international norms are translated or implemented as highly complex and multifaceted processes. Within such processes, gender norms may be re-constructed and re-interpreted, yet academics, practitioners and grassroots organizations can help ensure that the norms remain faithful to the women's rights agenda.

To open the discussions on Gender Mainstreaming (GM), *Prof. Jacqui True* (University of Auckland) defined it as an approach to integrating awareness of gender inequalities and differences in policymaking processes for the purpose of achieving greater gender equality and justice. While Prof. True affirmed that GM is a highly useful strategy, she underlined the need to constantly scrutinize what it means and what it does in different contexts. *Prof. Laura Parisi* (University of Victoria) argued that the diverse understanding of GM by human rights and development Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) could account for the variety of implementation outcomes. *Prof. Alison Woodward* (Free University of Brussels) contended that at the international level, International Organizations' isomorphism threatens the successful implementation of GM. *Prof. Claudia von Braunmühl* (Free University of Berlin) highlighted negative effects in the field of peace and security where GM had sometimes led to cutting funds for women-specific projects. Discussions showed that while many feminists remain critical of GM, others believe that it is the best working tool. It would be an important mandate for UN Women to champion Gender Mainstreaming by assuring that the concept is understood and implemented adequately by UN agencies and member states.

According to *Carolyn Hannan* (former Head of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women) the creation of UN Women takes place in a complex global context for gender equality which is aggravated by the economic crisis. The panel on "Economic Governance" provided different feminist perspectives on how the global economy is currently being regulated and which gendered effects these modes of regulation have. Panellists emphasized the connection between several crises – financial, social, food, fuel – which cannot be (but often are) looked at in isolation. *Prof. Brigitte Young* (University of Münster) took a gendered look at the financial and development sectors and stressed the need to analyze how male-centred networks influence policy outcomes. The audience presented the panellists with interesting questions regarding how women could take advantage of new, innovative financing mechanisms (such as the financial transaction tax) and how gender budgeting can be used as a tool for addressing inequalities.

All in all, UN Women represents the opportunity to formulate globally relevant policies for the empowerment of women. The appointment of *Ms. Bachelet* as the head of the new entity was considered a step in the right direction. As suggested by *Rachel Harris* (Women's Environment and Development Organization), the period left before the new entity starts functioning should be used by civil society and academia to advocate for a mechanism that will allow them to play an active role in the new entity. Likewise, UN Women should be open to external impulses. As *Prof. Ilse Lenz* (Ruhr-University Bochum) demonstrated, present-day movements often combine diverse global justice concerns in an innovative and intersectional fashion.

The conference was informed by a spirit of collaboration, respect and mutual learning between academics and practitioners. This spirit was perfectly reflected in a witticism quoted by Prof. Charlesworth: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory".

## Zur Person

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